HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

Landmark/District:	**Engine Company No. 16/Truck Company No. 3**	(**x**) Agenda
Address:	**1018 13th Street, NW**	
Meeting Date:	**November 29, 2012**	(**x**) Alterations
Case Number:	**13-033**	
Staff Reviewer:	**Tim Dennée**	

The applicants, property owner the District of Columbia Fire and Emergency Medical Services Department and the Department of General Services (with LeMay Erickson Willcox Architects), request the Board's review of a proposal to rehabilitate the firehouse, including reconstruction of the four vehicle-bay openings on the building's primary elevation in order to increase their width. The interior would be thoroughly renovated, with nearly all of the partitions removed, but some of the flooring would be saved.[1] Other alterations to the exterior would include the replacement of all windows and doors; the replacement of the slate roof with a faux slate; the construction of an aluminum balustrade around the top of the rear stair tower/hose tower; the removal of old conduit and fixtures; repairs to the belfry; and replacement of mechanical equipment. There is nothing in the application to suggest that security screens would be installed over the windows, as proposed in some of the previous firehouse reviews; the architect has stated that, in any case, there would be none on the façade.

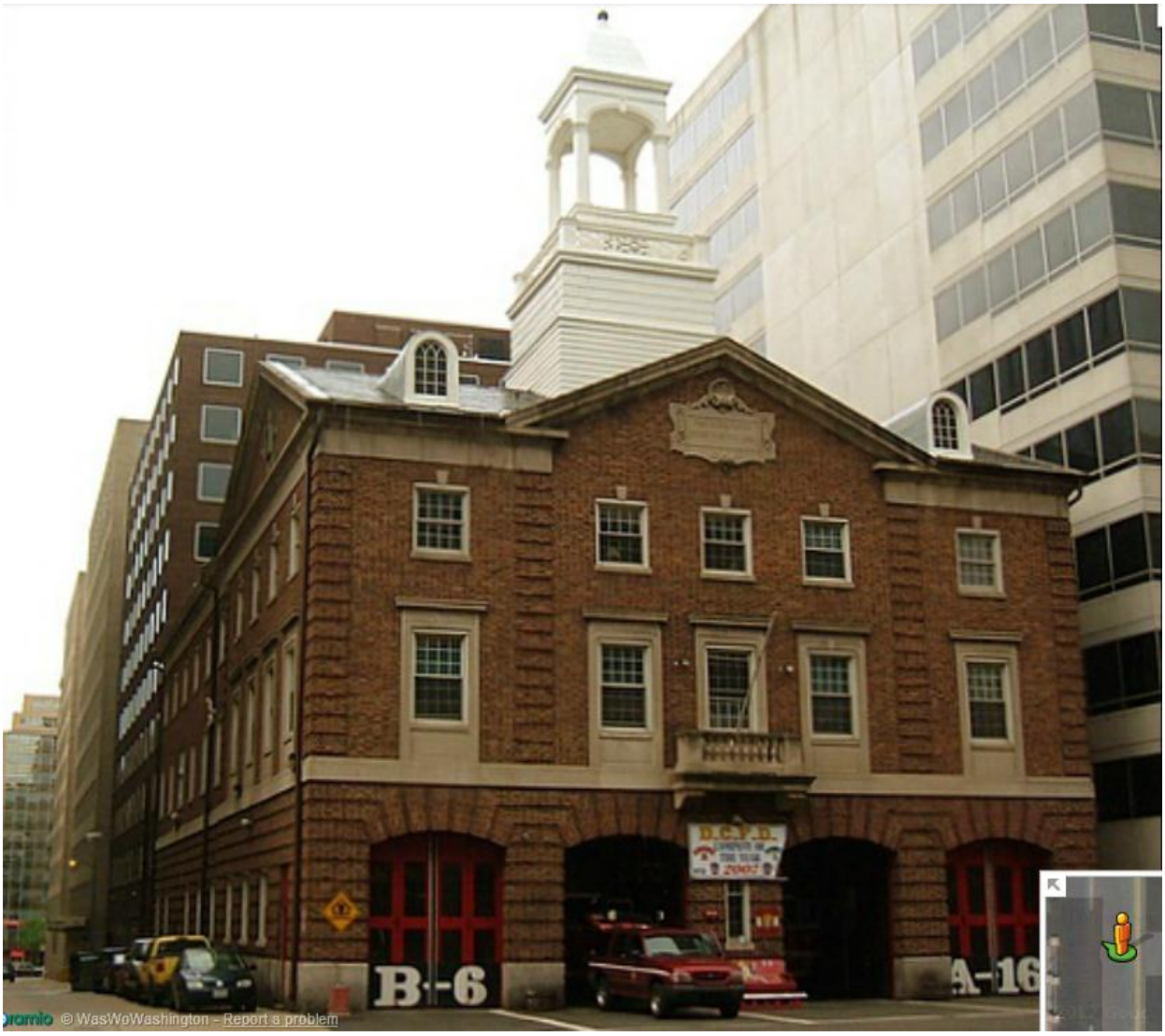
Background
Completed at the beginning of 1932, this three-story, four-bay-wide fire station, sometimes referred to as the "big house," became the new home to 16 Engine, formed in 1904. The last of the historic firehouses erected downtown, it was designed as something of a showpiece, with a higher level of interior and exterior detail and finish than possessed by its contemporaries in the outlying neighborhoods. The impressive, open tower is wholly decorative, as the traditional tower formerly used for drying cotton hoses is accommodated at the side and rear, and mostly within the body of the building. Engine 16 is the most important Colonial Revival example and the most important firehouse design of Municipal Architect Albert Harris, who was responsible for the earliest of the interwar-period stations.

The building's construction reflects the beginning of an effort, completed about 1940, to consolidate fire facilities and de-accession older houses dating to the pre-automobile age. It is not unique merely for its size alone. The third story was created for a "police and fire clinic, complete with operating room, recovery room, laboratory, and meeting room, capable of accommodating six doctors and numerous patients" but more recently has accommodated

[1] The interior is not designated, but it is subject to review by the Historic Preservation Office under the preservation law's Section 9(b).

Emergency Medical Services offices and the office of a battalion chief. This important, centrally located station was one of the first to be equipped with a two-way radio in 1940.

The Board designated this property in January 2011. This is the fifth application for widening the doors at a historic firehouse. In the first two instances, Engines 10 (1342 Florida Avenue NE) and 19 (2813 Pennsylvania Avenue SE), the Board concluded that the alterations were sufficiently compatible, that is, that while the interventions required affecting the historic fabric and proportions of the buildings, the change was not expected to be dramatically adverse.[2] Engine 10 came out not as well as expected, and the staff has not yet seen a finished Engine 19. Two other applications, for Engines 28 and 29, in Cleveland Park and on MacArthur Boulevard, went before the Mayor's Agent this year and were approved on the basis of the public safety interest.



[2] The reason in the former case was that it is a fairly simple building and a lesser example of the Colonial Revival style, and the material—brick—was relatively easily reworked. The latter, with its rubble stone arches within a field of stucco, was still easier to modify.

Roof replacement
The roof would be replaced with a faux slate, with the existing true slate salvaged for some other purpose. A roof of this size, relatively low pitch, and height above the observer is one that seems well suited for the use of one of the better faux slates, as color and the scale of the shingles relative to traditional slates are issues that are not as important. (Of course, given the not-too-dramatic difference in costs for the purchase and installation of the two materials, true slate may well prove more cost-effective in the long term.)

There is also mention of "refinishing" the dormers, but it is not clear from the drawings exactly what that would entail.

The installation of an aluminum balustrade around the top of the rear stair tower/hose tower is not an issue, as its position would not permit it to be seen from the ground.

Windows and pedestrian doors
All of the windows and exterior doors would be replaced. The doors would be replaced with insulated steel units. In one place, the plans suggest that these would be "paneled" doors, but the drawings indicate slab doors. Generally, this is not much of an issue, as there are no pedestrian doors on the façade. Most of the doors are set well back down a passage on one side of the building or down a wide alley on the other. Perhaps more attention should be given to the door near the southeast corner of the building, which is prominently visible from the street.

The windows shall replicate the configurations of the present ones, but they are to be aluminum instead of the original wood. The Board has generally permitted firehouses and schools to use quality aluminum replacements—which is actually a stretch of the standards for landmarks. The windows may then be acceptable, but in light of the proposal to widen doors, perhaps some consideration should be given to using more traditional materials for windows, doors and roof as a form of mitigation.

If windows *are* to be further secured, any security screens or bars should be limited to the first-floor alley windows and to areas that are not visible from the street.

Vehicle doors
The vehicle doors would be widened to twelve feet, allowing for eight-foot-wide trucks with one-foot mirrors to have a one-foot clearance on either side. This change would require the reconstruction of nearly all of the first-floor façade, including the arches, with a narrowing of all the piers and the watch room at center. The piers would be narrowed to the width of the piers (suggested by quoins) on the floors above.

The District of Columbia Historic Preservation Guidelines state that:

> Creating a new opening or enlarging an existing opening in a primary character-defining wall for a window, door, through-wall air conditioning unit or other reason is almost never appropriate. If a new opening must be created, for example to make a building [more] functional, it should be located on a rear, non-character-defining wall. The size, design and detailing of the new opening should be compatible with the character of the wall.

This principle is not arbitrary, as it is nearly always the case that the composition of the front of a building constitutes its most significant feature to the world at large. The most prominent and accessible portions of a building are those that have historically received the most care in design and quality in materials and workmanship, as owners—whether private, commercial, institutional or governmental—have traditionally had an interest in display and in the conveyance of implicit messages through architecture.

The greatest scrutiny is therefore applied to the review of façade alterations. Where minor exceptions have been made to the strict interpretation of the guidelines, they have been in cases where the program justified the exception when weighed against the quality of the original architecture or of subsequent alterations that have been of lesser quality or significance. The present building's design is of high quality and high integrity of materials, workmanship and design. This is the finest example of a Colonial Revival firehouse in Washington.

If one absolutely has to widen all of the doors, the elevation presented is about as well as one could do. Any alterations must be done with the utmost planning and the highest quality of masonry work, reusing the salvaged materials. Still, the alteration of the width and proportions of the openings is an adverse effect that should not be found compatible in itself.

Planning Encouraged by the Mayor's Agent

The Mayor's Agent has encouraged FEMS to undertake long-term planning to avoid the necessity of door-widening changes. The decision on Engine Company No. 28 acknowledged that:

> All parties agreed that long-term planning to find alternative sites or means of access for historic firehouses has the potential to avoid the necessity for making the types of changes to the character-defining elements to the front of the building proposed here.

In that case, the Mayor's Agent also acknowledged the imminent necessity of rehabilitating that station, as it was not only long overdue, but the engine company had already vacated the property for the work to take place. We have not yet seen, however, evidence of planning efforts that might in fact avoid such costly and unfortunate alterations.[3] That is, we should not wait until each project is urgent and in the offing, because addressing the issues then will be impossible. There are another five landmark firehouses that are slated to be altered, and a couple of them are especially problematic in terms of the difficulties with altering the masonry (see photographs below).

Recommendation

The preservation law requires the Board to make a finding as to whether a proposal is compatible with the character of a designated property. To a point, it permits the weighing of the programmatic or adaptability interest versus the strict preservation interest.

But the law also permits an applicant to proceed to the Mayor's Agent for a determination whether such a project is consistent with the purposes of the law, either because it is in fact

[3] Such efforts might include considering other sites that can expanded and altered over time (including land swaps), additions, limiting certain equipment to certain stations, etc.

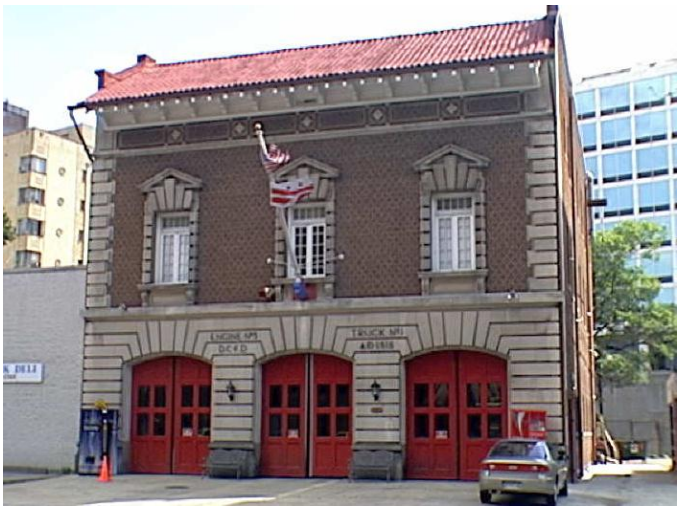
compatible, or it constitutes a project of special merit. The law explicitly addresses the Mayor's Agent's review of projects at public-safety facilities: "In considering a claim of special merit, substantial rehabilitation or new construction for operational needs of a public safety facility shall constitute a public interest having a significantly higher priority than that of historic preservation." In other words, the Mayor's Agent can approve alterations, even if incompatible from a strictly preservation perspective, if they are found to be necessary to meet the operational needs.

Recommendation
The HPO recommends that the Board:

- *Find the application to be generally compatible with the character of the landmark, with the exception of the widening of the vehicle doors;*

- *Encourage the Department of Fire and Emergency Medical Services to undertake planning in coordination with HPO and the Office of Planning to avoid or mitigate for further such alterations at other properties, such as those illustrated below where door widening would be more destructive to these buildings' design and integrity.*

Engine Company No. 23



Engine Company No. 3